

SOURCES FOR GERRIT VAN HONTHORST'S ITALIAN NICKNAME

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Gerrit van Honthorst's trip to Rome between ca. 1615 and 1620 had an indelible impact on his style. That Honthorst made a distinct impression on the Roman art world is also clear. His nocturnal settings and artificial lighting effects attracted commissions from prominent patrons such as Cardinal Scipione Borghese, Cosimo II, the Grand Duke of Tuscany, and the marchesi Benedetto and Vincenzo Giustiniani. The contemporary Italian art critic Giulio Mancini noted that Honthorst was able to command high prices for his striking paintings, which decorated both private residences and churches, including Santa Maria della Scala and Santa Maria della Vittoria.¹ When he returned to Utrecht

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in 1620, Honthorst's own contemporaries celebrated his Italian accomplishments with a lavish party.²

According to most modern scholarship, it was during his time in Italy that Honthorst earned the nickname "Gherardo delle Notti," or "Gerrit of the nights," because of his talent for rendering dramatic nighttime images. For example, J. Richard Judson wrote in the preface to his 1999 *catalogue raisonné*, "Gerrit van Honthorst, called Gherardo delle Notti by his Italian contemporaries, still maintains his fame as a painter of candlelight scenes."³ Judson is hardly the only authority on Honthorst to cite the nickname as fact. G. J. Hoogewerff's seminal 1917 articles in *Onze Kunst* used the nickname twice, without citation.⁴ Modern Italian scholarship commonly refers to Honthorst by his Italian moniker, such as in Gianni Papi's 1999 monograph *Gherardo delle Notti: Gerrit Honthorst in Italia*.⁵ The attentive reader will notice, however, that none of these texts credit the nickname to a contemporary source. When did Honthorst actually earn this name? An investigation of archival sources suggests that "Gherardo delle Notti" may not be nearly as contemporary as has been assumed.

Prominent seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century biographies frequently associate Honthorst with his nocturnal paintings, but none uses the nickname. In his 1619 biography, Giulio Mancini praises Honthorst for his skilled rendering of candlelit scenes. However, he calls him only "Gerardo."⁶ Joachim Sandrart, one of Honthorst's students, similarly notes in his 1675 *Teutsche academie* that Honthorst was admired for his night pieces, but he says nothing about a nickname.⁷ Samuel van Hoogstraten, who mentions Honthorst in the context of an anecdote about the painter's commercial success in his 1678 *Inleyding tot de hooge schoole der schilderkonst*, does not use the name either.⁸ Arnold Houbraken does not reference the name at all in his biography of Honthorst in the *Groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche kosntschilders en schilderessen* from 1753.⁹

Seventeenth-century documents dating from Honthorst's life frequently name the artist, but they never use the nickname "Gherardo

delle Notti.” None of the documents compiled by Braun in his 1966 dissertation mention it.¹⁰ Two payments to Honthorst during his time in Rome have been published since then. A 1617 document of the payments made for the Longhi-Sanzio chapel in Santa Maria della Scala records that one “Ghirardo pittori” received 88 *scudi* for his painting of Saint Paul.¹¹ From 1620, there is a record of “Sig.r Gherardo Van Hont Houst fiammingo pittore” receiving 250 *scudi* from Piero Guicciardini for an Adoration of the Shepherds painted for Santa Felicitia in Florenece.¹² The Getty Provenance Index contains eighteen records of inventories with works by Honthorst that were drawn up during his lifetime, but they either use a variant on the spelling of “Honthorst” or, in many Italian inventories, “Gherardo Fiammingo” or “Gherardo Olandese.” The earliest inventory mentioning Honthorst, made between 1617 and 1621 for the household of Agostino Doria in Genoa, describes “Un Santo Geronimo di mano Gerardo Fiamingo.”¹³

The very earliest record I have located that is tangentially connected to the phrase “Gherardo delle Notti” comes from an inventory produced shortly after Honthorst died. A 1659 record from the Naples collection of Ettore Capecelatro, Marchese di Torella, refers to “Uno Quadro piccolo di Monsù di notte con cornice d’ebano.”¹⁴ Labrot has suggested that this “Master of the Night” may refer to Honthorst, although it should be noted that he was not the only painter in Italy at the time to specialize in nighttime scenes.¹⁵ The next related nickname appears in an inventory, made between 1692 and 1704, of the Palazzo Barberini alle Quattro Fontane, then belonging to Cardinal Carlo Barberini, which refers to a work by one “Fiamingo della Notte.”¹⁶ The earliest document I have located that uses the full name “Gherardo delle Notti” is the 1709–10 inventory of Giovanni Battista Pamphilj-Aldobrandini’s palazzo in the Piazza del Collegio Romano, which describes a Saint Joseph, “di mano di Monsù Gherardo delle Notti.”¹⁷ Of the seventy-one records compiled by the Getty that use either “Gherardo delle Notti” or “Gherardo della Notte,” all date to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

It is, of course, impossible to categorically claim that no one used this nickname while Honthorst was in Rome. Yet the surviving evidence suggests, instead, that the nickname only emerged around the turn of the eighteenth century and rapidly gained in popularity in the following decades. One marker of this rise may be found in the differing editions of Filippo Titi's *Studio di pittura, scoltura, & architettura, nelle chiese di Roma*. In the first edition of the book, published in 1674, Titi describes works by Honthorst in Santa Maria della Scala and in Santa Maria della Vittoria. In these entries, Titi calls the artist "Gherardo Fiammingo" and "Gherardo Olandese," respectively.¹⁸ It is not until the fifth edition of the book, published in 1721, that the text for Santa Maria della Scala is amended to read "Gherardo Fiammingo, detto Gherardo delle notti."¹⁹ New entries in the subsequent 1763 edition, expanded to include palaces and other collections, also describe work by a "Monsù Gherardo delle notti" in the Palazzo Spada, and a painting by "hundthorst d'Utrech, detto Gherardo delle notti" in the Palazzo Giustiniani.²⁰ Apparently the nickname had entered wide enough use to merit revisions in these later editions.

Even if Honthorst's contemporaries did not actually call him "Gherardo delle Notti," their biographical accounts and correspondence still testify to the impact of his candlelit scenes. However, barring new evidence, we should no longer erroneously attribute the nickname to Honthorst's contemporaries. Early seventeenth-century Italians' preference for "Gherardo Fiammingo" or "Gherardo Olandese" suggests that it was Honthorst's foreign identity, as much as his fluency in rendering artificial light, that helped to distinguish the young artist in Rome.

NOTES

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1. G. Mancini, *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (Rome: 1619), fol. 86.
2. The Utrecht humanist Aernout van Buchell described the event in his diary; *Notae Quotidianae van Aernout van Buchell*, ed. J. W. C. van Campen (Utrecht: 1940), 1–2.
3. J. R. Judson and R. E. O. Ekkart, *Gerrit van Honthorst 1592–1656* (Doornspijk: 1999), vii.
4. G. J. Hoogewerff, “De werken van Gerard Honthorst te Rome,” *Onze Kunst* 31 (1917): 90, 92.
5. G. Papi, *Gherardo delle Notti: Gerrit Honthorst in Italia* (Florence: 1999)
6. Mancini, *Considerazioni*, fol. 86.
7. J. von Sandrart, *Teutsche academie* (Nuremberg: 1675), vol. 2, book 3, 303.
8. S. van Hoogstraten, *Inleyding tot de hooge Schoole der Schilderkonst* (Rotterdam: 1678), 234.
9. A. Houbraken, *De groote schouburgh der Nederlandtsche kosnstschilders en schilderessen* (The Hague: 1753), vol. 2, 149–50.
10. To his credit, Braun does not invoke the name at any point in his text; H. Braun, “Gerard und Willem van Honthorst,” Ph.D diss. (Universität Göttingen: 1966).
11. T. Megna, “Gherardo delle Notti a Roma: le commissioni pubbliche, il ‘patronage’ Giustiniani, e nuovi elementi documentari,” in *Decorazione e collezionismo a Roma nel Seicento: vicende di artisti, committenti, mercanti*, ed. F. Cappelletti (Rome: 2003): 90. (Item P-294 in Getty Payments to Artists database, Getty Provenance Index, J. Paul Getty Trust, cited hereafter as GPA).
12. G. Corti, “Il registro de’ mandati dell’ambasciatore granducaale Piero Guicciardini e la committenza artistica fiorentina a Roma nel secondo decennio del Seicento,” *Paragone* 40, no. 473 (July 1989): 111, 113, no. 52. (GPA item P-295).
13. V. Farina, *Giovan Carlo Doria: promotore delle arti a Genova nel primo Seicento* (Florence: 2002), 200, no. B-353. (Item 0184 from archival inventory I-191, Getty Provenance Index databases, J. Paul Getty Trust, cited hereafter as GPI).
14. G. Labrot, *Italian Inventories 1: Collections of Paintings in Naples 1600–1780* (Munich: 1992), 114, no. 19:0058 (GPI item 0058 from archival inventory I-601).
15. *Ibid.*, 521.
16. M. A. Lavin, *Seventeenth-Century Barberini Documents and Inventories of Art* (New York, 1975), 433, fol. 200v, no. 129. (GPI item 0135 from archival inventory I-3736).

17. Rome, Archivio Doria Pamphilj (18 November 1709), no. 20 (GPI item 0020 from archival inventory I-537).
18. F. Titi, *Studio di pittura, scoltura, et architettura nelle chiese di Roma (1674–1763)*, ed. B. Contardi and S. Romano (Florence: 1987), 25, 156.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 63, 85.